

## Heritage Tourism to preserve past and attract visitors

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on January 22, 2008)

In June 2007, a report, *Creating the Living Story of "The Secret City,"* was provided to Katy Brown of the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitor's Bureau by Akins Crisp Public Strategies. It is subtitled, *A Heritage Tourism Plan to Significantly Expand Oak Ridge Annual Visitations.*

In the Executive Summary of this comprehensive document on Heritage Tourism, is stated, "Oak Ridge can be the premier southeast destination for exploring America's 'Big science' era. However, the 'secret city' of Oak Ridge is still a relatively well-kept secret. The city, with its internationally significant story, authentic resources, compelling personal experiences, and proximity to recreational venues, contains all the elements of a world-class tourist destination. The challenge is to effectively market Oak Ridge to get visitors here and keep them overnight."

In a section six of eight, *Key Strategies that Tell the Story*, is found:

Benefits to Heritage Area designation:

- Potential for federal funding
- A federally recognized designation that promotes Oak Ridge's Identity and nationally significant story
- Affiliation with the branded and respected National Park Service and access to technical support from the national office
- A vehicle to unify Oak Ridge's efforts in conservation, preservation, and sustainable tourism efforts

Challenges to National Heritage Area designation:

- Gaining federal designation is time-consuming and labor-intensive, and the process typically last 1-3 years or more
- A lengthy and extensive process to conduct a feasibility study, with for federal review, and to gain congressional support for designation
- Finding non-federal funds to match federal appropriations dollar for dollar

Although the national heritage areas program does not yet have formal requirements for designation in place, the National Park service recommends that four critical steps be completed prior to congressional designation:

- Completion of a suitability/feasibility study;
- Public involvement in the suitability/feasibility study;
- Demonstration of widespread public support among heritage area residents for the proposed designation; and
- Commitment to the proposal from key constituents, which may include governments, industry, and private, non-profit organizations, in addition to area residents.

Number seven of eight, *Key Strategies that Tell the Story*, states:

Highlight Signature Facilities

- Focus on K-25 Visitors Overlook located on the west end of Oak Ridge as it tells the larger story
- Support the on-going efforts of the Partnership for K-25 Preservation in telling the story of K-25, Y-12, Happy valley, and the Wheat Community"

The above segments of the Heritage Tourism Report are quoted to lay the groundwork for the following observations. Please consider the potential that Heritage Tourism holds as one of Oak Ridge's economic development strategies in light of the unique history that is Oak Ridge.

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1. The National Heritage Area designation can add authenticity to historic Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project sites. The National Park Service study being concluded after two years will have looked at all the Manhattan Project sites and considered if forming a Manhattan Project National Park is feasible. Included in this study is consideration of other designations that can be of assistance to historic sites. We should obtain this designation as our close neighbor Blount County has done.

However, a slight variation is in order for us. We should call our National Heritage Area a *National Heritage Area Corridor* that extends from Lake City with its Coal Mining Museum to TVA's planned city of Norris, to The Museum of Appalachia, to the Green McAdoo Cultural Center, to Oak Ridge with our American Museum of Science and Energy, the Secret City Commemorative Walk, our Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's Graphite Reactor, Y-12's New Hope Center History Exhibit Hall and K-25's Historic Tourism destination that includes the Historic K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant building footprint and museum attraction, the Historic Wheat Heritage Trail, the African Burial Ground and the Southern Appalachian Railroad Museum.

And, my list does not even include historic Oak Ridge's Jackson Square, alphabet housing, a restored Guest House and other inherent tourist attractions such as the Chapel on the Hill, the second largest outdoor swimming pool in the southeast (or maybe it is the largest?), the driving tour of Oak Ridge and other lesser known but still contributing elements of our heritage.

And, I also did not include the modern marvels of the Spallation Neutron Source, the fastest open science computer in the world at ORNL, Freels Bend Cabin and just outside our city limits, the David Hall Cabin, likely the oldest cabin in Anderson County! Then there is also the Bull Run Steam Plant. You can even think of more potential attractions, I am sure.

2. Heritage Tourism is recognized by the Tennessee Historical Commission as having important economic potential. A 2002 report, *A Future for the Past*, on page 43, states, "Tourism is the state's second largest industry, generating nearly \$10 billion in 2000...However, heritage tourism can only take root where historic preservation has prepared the ground."

For us at Oak Ridge, that simply means we must identify the key historic structures and equipment that must be preserved for us to have a viable opportunity to capitalize on our unique heritage of the Manhattan Project and the Cold War as well as the scientific discoveries that have so profoundly impacted the world in so many ways. K-25 is a prime example.

It is NOT enough to document the history. For heritage tourism to work as an economic development strategy, something tangible must remain for the visitor to experience. They must see, feel, hear, touch, smell and experience the REAL THING. As good as movies are, even they cannot supplant the real thing. Heritage tourists DEMAND the real thing. That means the tourists MUST see an actual K-25 withdrawal alley, actual compressors, full scale motors and the huge expanse of the footprint of the 44 acre K-25 "U-shaped" building for the "heritage tourism destination" to be effective.

*Nuclear Tourism and the Manhattan Project* By: Jenna Berger of the University of Houston, states, "Throughout the world, sites where governments tested atomic bombs and where scientists performed groundbreaking research on atomic energy are now becoming tourist destinations. In the United States especially, museums dedicated to telling the history of nuclear developments and legacies of the arms race and the cold war are also being created and visited at an astonishing rate. Public interest in these sites parallels the increasing interest in preservation and heritage tourism that has swept across the United States in recent years."

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Next week, I will explain two more ways in which Oak Ridge is perfectly suited to become a heritage tourism destination.



A view of the actual motors and pumps that moved the uranium gas through the series of cells – this view conveys the size of the facility and the number of gaseous diffusion stages in each alley